

Becoming Roman, staying Gaulish... and taking heads

A spectacular new tombstone of a Roman auxiliary from Lancaster

Simon James

The recent discovery of a tombstone in Lancaster enables us, based on a mixture of evidence, probability, and deduction, to reconstruct what the life of a Gaul serving as a Roman auxiliary soldier at the end of the first century A.D. was probably like.

Recently, during archaeological excavations in Lancaster, a tombstone was found lying face-down in two pieces, close to the road leading south out of the Roman fort. Bearing a vivid relief of a fierce cavalryman, over a brief epitaph which tells us who we are looking at, it proved to be one of the most spectacular Roman tombstones ever found in Britain. Insus, son of Vodullus, has returned to the light of day after some eighteen centuries.

Of buff sandstone, his monument originally stood about 2.5m tall, and would have been brightly painted, the letters of the inscription probably picked out in red. It reads:

'To the shades of the dead. Insus son of Vodullus, citizen of the Treveri, cavalryman of the ala Augusta, troop of Victor, curator. Domitia his heir had this set up.'

These scant lines and accompanying image allow us to say a remarkable amount, with some certainty, about the life of one particular Roman soldier. It provides a fresh example of what epigraphers (inscription specialists), historians, and archaeologists can tell from such artefacts, by linking the information they provide into the wider network of knowledge of Roman history. First, let's look at what we can say, or reasonably guess, about Insus' life from the inscription, and then at the ways in which we can get to such conclusions.

The (probable) life and death of a Roman auxiliary: the early years

Probably during the reign of the emperor Vespasian (A.D. 69–79), a boy was born among the Treveri, an important tribe of eastern Gaul dwelling around the river Moselle (and who gave their name to modern Trier, Germany). His father Vodullus was

The tombstone of Insus, son of Vodullus, recently found in Lancaster. In his plumed helmet, Insus stares boldly at the viewer, the head of a slain enemy dangling by its hair from his sword hand. The inscription reads (after Roger Tomlin):

DIS Ṣ MANIBVS ṢNSVS VODVLLI[...Ṣ]VS CIVE TREVER EQVES ALAE AVG[...Ṣ] VICTORIS CVRATOR DOMITIA [2–3 letters missing at the end]

This expands to:

Dis ṢManibus Insus Vodulli [Ṣ]il]ius cive(s) Treverorum eques alae Aug(ustae) Ṣ[t(urma)] Victoris curator Domitia [Ṣ]h(eres) f(aciundum) c(uravit)]

See text for translation. (Photo courtesy of Lancashire Museums/Lancaster City Museums)

a fairly prosperous provincial, and heir to the proud military traditions of his people who provided cavalrymen for the auxiliary regiments of Rome's armies. The *auxilia*, raised from the peoples of Rome's provinces, supported the heavy infantry of the Roman citizen legions. Vodullus' grandfather may well have fought Caesar, and perhaps he himself served in the Roman armies. His son Insus, having learned to ride in childhood and been instilled with the martial traditions of the Treveri, enlisted as a trooper during the reign of the emperor Domitian (81–96). Insus signed on for 25 years. Auxiliaries had about a 60% chance of surviving to discharge, and receiving one of the principal rewards of service: Roman citizenship. He was posted to an *ala*, a cavalry regiment about 500 strong, in Britain. The *ala Gallorum Proculeiana* had been among the first of the regular auxiliary units raised for the 'New Model Armies' created by the first emperor, Augustus. Its names record the people from whom it was initially raised, and as a specific identifier among several *alae* of Gauls, the personal name of its first commander, Proculeius.

Here young Insus underwent rigorous training in use of sword, spear and javelins, and learned how to ride and fight in formation with the rest of his *turma* of 32 cavalrymen, under Victor, their decurion. Sixteen such *turmae* made up the regiment. The glory days of expansionist wars of conquest in Britain were probably over before Insus joined his unit, which was a prestigious one. The conquests of Britain's famous governor Agricola, which took Roman arms to the far north of Scotland, were abandoned by the emperor in the late 80s. But it was probably during Agricola's campaigns that Insus' unit performed an outstanding feat of arms, for sometime around this period the unit received an additional honorific title incorporating the emperor's family name, becoming (we think) the *ala Flavia Gallorum Proculeiana*. Perhaps it achieved glory in the decisive battle with the Caledonians at Mons Graupius where the historian Tacitus records that the *auxilia* did all the fighting while the legions watched in reserve. Some years later the *ala* changed its name again when Domitian, last emperor of the Flavian dynasty, was assassinated and subjected to *damnatio memoriae* — official obliteration of all reference to him. *Flavia* was replaced by a more generic imperial title, the unit henceforth known as the *ala Augusta Gallorum Proculeiana*.

It may already have been stationed at Lancaster when Insus joined. It was certainly there by the end of his service, in a timber-built fort with turf rampart. Insus and his *commilitones* ('fellow soldiers') will only have been in barracks much during the winter. In summer, if not on campaign he will have been on exercises, training routines, patrolling to keep an eye on the recently-conquered Britons, and a host of other duties, not least to do with pasturage and fodder for more than a thousand horses, and a constant supply of remounts.

The later life of Insus: accountancy, love, and death

During his service, Insus himself proved to have a talent for something as important to the operation of the Roman military as the sword or the horse: paperwork. His soldiers' Latin, literacy, and numeracy, perhaps learnt in service, were good enough for him to become *curator*, accountant for his troop. This brought no additional pay but had other valued benefits, making him a member of the charmed circle of *immunes*, soldiers whose special skills gave them immunity from the dirty routine jobs around the base. Insus was prospering, and acquired his own modest *familia*. Like all cavalrymen, he will have employed or owned a groom to look after his horse, tack and arms. Then there was Domitia.

Insus probably regarded Domitia as his wife, although the army would not officially recognise marriages of serving soldiers. These only acquired formal status at the end of soldiers' service, when the decrees granting auxiliaries citizenship also granted it to hitherto-invisible wives ('but only one per man'; some auxiliaries were apparently polygamous). Domitia may originally have been purchased by Insus as a slave and concubine, or, like Insus himself, she might have been a free provincial. Either way, she was probably much younger than him, as was common at the time; it would have taken him some years to save enough to buy a slave or maintain a wife, and he would have chosen someone young and healthy. However, they apparently did not have any children.

Insus was sadly destined to be among the 40% of Roman soldiers who died in service, before reaching veteran status. He probably died at Lancaster. Domitia dutifully saw to his funerary rites. He was cremated, and his ashes collected for burial in the cemetery which was developing along the roads leading from the fort. His last resting place was marked by a substantial tombstone, on which he was depicted at war, above the terse inscription recording his life. This stone gave him some kind of immortality, as those entering and leaving the fort saw his image and remembered him.

So how can we tell all this?

It may seem far-fetched to derive so detailed a biography of this Roman cavalryman from a few abbreviated Latin phrases, and indeed the dates presented are guesses. However, these and other details cannot be far wrong, because Insus' tombstone is no isolated piece of evidence. It comes from one of dozens of forts, and stands among dozens of known military tombstones and hundreds of other surviving texts left by the Roman army of Britain. And beyond this, there is a vast amount of other historical information which can tell us about the general lifestyle of such men. All this allows us, for example, to date the stone reasonably closely, after the damnatio of Domitian, and before the ala's known move under Hadrian up to his new wall.

So, Insus probably died during the reign of Trajan (A.D. 98–117). Even though his epitaph does not tell us his years of service (as many others do), his post of *curator*, and apparent possession of an informal wife suggest he was not a recent recruit. He was, then, probably nearer discharge age of early to mid-40s than recruitment age of 17–20, which makes plausible his birth in Vespasian's reign. We can make good guesses about Insus' training and duties from many texts discussing military affairs. In the case of cavalry we have the works of Arrian, who was growing up in distant Asia (Turkey) while Insus served in Britain; he later wrote in detail about the elaborate training manoeuvres performed by cavalrymen.

A picture worth a thousand words? Insus the Roman and Insus the Gaul

Perhaps we can also get inside Insus' head, at least for a moment, this time not through the inscription, but the spectacular relief

above it. Some have dismissed such carvings as dismal examples of crude provincial art, especially when seen alongside splendid marbles from the imperial capital. But that is unfair; metropolitan artists could not have done much better with such coarse British sandstone. Through this monument, perhaps commissioned by Insus before he died, but which at least reflected the values and tastes of his circle of comrades, he proclaims his Romanness; such reliefs, and written epitaphs, were ideas brought to the North by Rome. It also proclaims Insus' membership of the brotherhood of Roman soldiers, and especially of cavalrymen. These tombstones, showing the deceased on his charger trampling an enemy, were a Greek idea taken up by Thracian cavalrymen and spread with their recruitment throughout the northern Roman armies.

But there is one other startling and unique detail on this monument. Instead of the more usual spear, Insus brandishes a naked sword. He has just killed his enemy, whose severed head hangs by the hair from his fingers. Insus is also proclaiming himself to be a Gaul, who had a long tradition of taking heads as battle-trophies. Even as Insus was serving in Britain, other soldiers were conquering Dacia (Rumania) for Trajan, in vast wars commemorated on the famous column erected in Rome. Here some auxiliaries, often presumed to be Gauls, are shown presenting severed heads to the emperor as tokens of their courage.

Insus wanted to be remembered – or Domitia and his comrades wanted to remember him – as both Roman soldier, and also as fierce and victorious Gallic warrior. Like his *commilitones*, Insus was proud to be a soldier of the emperor, and proud that he was becoming a Roman – but equally, he was proud to be a Gaul.

Simon James is Reader in Archaeology at the University of Leicester; he is particularly interested in the Roman world and societies with which it interacted, including northern 'barbarians' and the peoples of the ancient Middle East. He would like to thank Stephen Bull for kindly providing the photograph of the Insus tombstone. This new find is currently undergoing conservation, but should be on public display in Lancaster in 2008.